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**Political Ideology**

            What do we mean by the term ideology?  We use it to refer to the structure of a person’s ideas or beliefs about political values and the role of government and political power.  Ideology refers to the political and economic views we develop as we mature.  These views are about how government works and how government should work, and they link our basic values to the day-to-day operations or policies of government.  Most people are not deeply “ideological” in the sense that-- unlike legislators, lobbyists, or party activists -- the average citizen does not spend a lot of time thinking about government and public policies.  Still, all of us have values and sometimes fiercely held views.

            Our ideological values provide us with a lens through which we view politics.  Our ideology helps simplify the complexities of politics, policies, personalities, and programs.  Our views are acquired in a vague way when we are young, reinforced and recast in schools, churches, families, and neighborhoods, and further shaped by the media, major events, and the rhetoric of political campaigns.  An ideology may be an accurate or an inaccurate description of reality, yet it is still the way we think about people, power, and society.  Ideologies have consequences.  Ideologies, collectively held, shape social and political institutions and help determine public policies and constitutional change.

**LIBERALISM**

            In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, classical liberals fought to minimize the role of government.  They were stressing individual rights and perceived governments as the primary threat to these rights and liberties.  Thus, they favored a small government and sought ample guarantees of protection from governmental harassment.

            The emphasis on individualism has remained constant;  it is the perception of government that has changed.  Nowadays, proponents of liberalism view government as protecting individuals from being abused by a variety of nongovernmental forces (market vagaries, business decisions, and so on).

            In its modern American usage, liberalism also refers to a belief in the positive uses of government to bring about justice and equality of opportunity.  Modern day liberals wish to preserve the rights of the individual and the right to own private property, but they are very willing to have the government intervene in the economy to remedy the defects of capitalism and a market economy.  Contemporary American liberalism has its roots in FDR’s New Deal programs, designed to aid the poor and to protect people against the possibilities of unemployment, inadequate or deficient medical assistance, and inadequate or deficient housing and education.  Liberals believe in affirmative action programs and in progressive taxation measures and regulatory efforts that help protect the average worker’s health and safety.  American liberals have also favored the right of unions to organize as well as to strike.

            On a more philosophical level, liberals generally believe in the possibility of progress.  They believe things can be made to work, that the future will be better, that obstacles can be overcome.  This positive set of beliefs may explain some of their willingness to believe also in the potential benefits of governmental action, a willingness to alter or even negate the old Jeffersonian notion that “government governs best when it governs least.”  Liberals contend that the character of modern technology and the side effects of industrialization cry out for at least limited governmental programs to offset the loss of liberties suffered by the less well-to-do and the weak.  Liberals frequently stress the need for a politics of compassion, a politics of affirmative government.

            Liberals contend conservatives will always rule in their own interest and will act on the maxim:  “let the government take care of the rich, and the rich in turn will take care of the poor.”  Liberals, on the other hand, prefer to believe that the government should take care of the weak, for the strong can nearly always take care of themselves.  “ We have rejected the discredited theory that the fortunes of the nation should be limited to the nation should be in the hands of the privileged few,” said President Harry Truman.  “Instead, we believe that our economic system should rest on a democratic foundation and that wealth should be created for the benefit of all … Every segment of our population and every individual has a right to expect from his government a fair deal.”

**CONSERVATISM**

            In America conservatism has its roots in the political thinking of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, and many of their contemporaries.  In contrast to liberals, conservatives want to keep government small, except in the area of national defense.  However, because conservatives take a more pessimistic view of human nature than liberals, they maintain that most people need strong leadership institutions, firm laws, and strict moral codes to keep their appetites under control.  Conservatives are also inclined to believe that those who fail in life are some way the architects of their own misfortune and thus must bear the main responsibility for solving their own problems.

            Traditional conservatives recognize that government must exist, but insist it should be limited in what it does, and that, within its proper sphere of action, it should be strong and resolute.  “The purpose of government is to maintain the framework of order within which other private institutions can operate effectively.”  The traditional conservative applauds the heartfelt compassion implicit in Franklin Roosevelt’s Second Bill of Rights, but believes government must not be allowed to overstep its bounds and undermine the role of society.

            Conservatives prefer to encourage churches, families, voluntary groups, foundations, bi and small businesses, an local governments to spearhead the drive to secure the lofty goals outlined by FDR.  To turn exclusively to the federal government to solve those problems, conservatives say, is to guarantee a too powerful, intrusive, and expensive government.  Moreover, taxes would soar and the freedom of the majority would be greatly diminished.  So also would the initiative and risk-taking entrepreneurial impulses of inventors, capital investors, and ingenious business leaders be irreversibly discouraged.  To keep political power within its proper bounds, the utmost vigilance and care are required.

            In addition to fighting the welfare state, traditional conservatives, in the name of freedom, have been emphatically pro-business.  Thus they oppose higher taxes on profits(and , in some cases, are opposed to corporate taxes altogether)  and any but the most necessary anti-trust, trade, and environmental regulations on corporations.  The functions of government should be to:  protect us against communism (terrorism) and criminals, preserve law and order, enforce private contracts, foster competitive markets, and encourage free and fair trade.

**Political Ideology Reading Guide**

1.  Give the reading’s definition of ideology.

2.  In your own words define the term ideology.  (may not be identical to #2)

3.  How does a person’s political ideology help her/him carry out their responsibilities as a citizen?

4.  Liberals emphasize the rights of whom?

5.  To protect the rights of #4, what do liberals want the government to do?

6.  Contemporary liberalism in America traces its roots back to whom?  (what person)?

7.  What do liberals say in response to the quote “Let the government take care of the rich, and the rich in turn will take care of the poor.”?

8.  American conservatism traces its roots back to what two men?

9.  Conservatism emphasizes what rights?

10.  What role do conservatives see government playing in society/people’s lives?

11.  Instead of the government, conservatives believe what groups/institutions should work to solve many of society’s problems?

12.  Conservatives believe that the functions of government should be to:

**What is your political ideology?**

Visit the following web address: http://www.politicalcompass.org/index

1. Read the instructions on the front page.
2. Take the test.
3. Draw your finished grid below.